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ABSTRACT

As increasing numbers of postsecondary learners enroll in commuter campuses, speech communication departments can identify the characteristics which make commuting students somewhat different from their counterparts on residential campuses. Priorities of these two groups differ--students whose primary focus in life is the college experience contrast with commuting students with drastically different and demanding activities. The maturity level is also different, with commuting students tending to be older and more mature. A third area of difference is the focus of the students' academic interests. Vocationally-oriented majors have become increasingly popular. The implications of these basic differences are significant for speech communication faculty, and curricular adaptations can be made to accommodate these differences. Commuter campus classes could, for example, require few assignments which mandate that students meet in specific groups outside of class. In classes, innovative teaching strategies can engage the interest of the commuter student, methods such as interdisciplinary orientation, peer teaching, and wide diversity of materials. Because of the maturity level of commuter students, faculty members may need to shift their orientations away from that of omniscient authorities. Finally, speech communication co-curricular activities can be modified for the commuter student by, for example, planning flexibility in practice schedules and moderating travel time for extracurricular programs. These adaptation can provide an impetus for development and strengthening of the speech communication curriculum. (MM)

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Commuter and Residential Campuses: Academic and Co-Curricular Implications for Speech Communication Faculty

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The image of traditional ivy-covered college campuses with bell-towers dominant at their centers has given way to a contemporary image that includes campuses built in the centers of the nation's metropolitan and suburban areas. No longer do all university students walk idyllically from brick classroom buildings past fountains to quaint residence halls. University students now are equally likely to drive from their homes to massive parking lots, attend two classes, and drive back home. What are the consequences for higher education of these contrasting types of university campuses--one populated primarily with students who are full-time residents of those campuses and the other populated by students who commute to their classes?

The question asked here is: what impact does the nature of the campus--residential or commuter--have on academic and co-curricular activities in departments of communication? In order to respond to this question, the paper will identify several basic differences between residential and commuting students, describe implications of those differences, and make recommendations for speech communication faculty.

Because many commuter campuses enroll a high percentage of nontraditional students (those who are typically older, often married, returning to college after an extended absence from the classroom), observations about differences between residential and commuter campuses are also observations about differences between traditional and nontraditional students. What are some of these differences?

Differences

One clear contrast between students on residential campuses and those who commute is in their priorities. Commuting students, the majority of whom often have major family responsibilities and full-time employment, bring a different

set of priorities to their classes than do residential students whose responsibilities are focused more directly on themselves and their own needs. Menges (1981) noted the importance of taking into account the students' "life situations" (p. 565) because those life situations affect what the learners bring to the class sessions they attend. Unlike residential students whose time use can, if they are so motivated, be focused almost exclusively on academic matters, commuting students typically have a plethora of competing demands facing them (Gaff and Gaff, 1981). Faculty members accustomed to classrooms of students whose primary focus in life is the college experience will note the contrast with the commuting students whose days are filled with drastically different and demanding activities.

A second marked difference in the two kinds of students is maturity level. Even in simple terms of age, commuter campuses are populated with older students who, through the passing of years, bring a different life perspective than the traditional 19-year-old college sophomore. The average age of undergraduates at Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne, for example, is over twenty-seven years. One way in which this maturity difference manifests itself is in the goals and needs that the students bring to their college experiences. The students' maturity levels may mean that their approaches to intellectual inquiry vary. Increased levels of sophistication in the older commuting students may mean that they see the intellectual world as filled with pluralistic ways of understanding while the younger students, more typically found on residential campuses, may view new ideas and problems more dualistically (Perry, 1970).

A third basic area of difference between students at commuter and residential campuses is the focus of their academic interests. With students legitimately concerned with making a living, vocationally-oriented majors have

become increasingly popular. Some colleges have allowed these types of pre-professional majors to require up to 70% of the credit hours taken by the students (Bok, 1986, p. 70). Although the entire American system of post-secondary education has faced a pressure to move toward more career-oriented, vocational curricula, this pressure is particularly pronounced on commuter campuses. Commuter campuses, even more than residential campuses, enroll students with a "career orientation" (Gaff and Gaff, 1981). While the residential students may bring a sense of appreciation for new knowledge for its own sake, the commuter campuses are much more heavily populated with students who want learning to have a direct practical advantage.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications of these fairly basic differences between residential and commuting students--priorities, maturity, and expectations about academics--are significant for speech communication faculty. Since residential campuses have been the norm in American higher education in recent history, many considerations about academic programs, instruction, and co-curricular programming have assumed the presence of a residential student body. No longer, however, is that enrollment reality facing many departments of speech communication. What kind of adaptations need to be made in order to teach effectively those students who do not fit that traditional pattern? Because residential campuses are the norm, the implications that follow are identified primarily in terms of their pertinence for commuter campuses. That focus provides an awareness of the new reality on many campuses.

In the area of academics, the primary goals of undergraduate education guide all campuses, regardless of housing patterns. Bok (1986) describes these general goals concisely:

> Undergraduates should acquire an ample store of knowledge, both in depth, by concentrating in a particular field, and in breadth, by devoting attention to several different disciplines. They should gain an ability to communicate with precision and style, a basic competence in quantitative skills, a familiarity with at least one foreign language, and a capacity to think clearly and critically. (p. 54)

Because commuting students work with extraordinarily demanding schedules, the curriculum needs to be designed so that expectations and resulting requirements are very clear to students. The overall academic goals, despite pressure for vocationalism, can still be maintained. Students with heavy orientation toward pragmatism, however, need to be told boldly and explicitly of the goals and of the reasons for them. Without compromising academic standards amid the pressure for more "pragmatism" (Gaff and Gaff, 1981, p. 644), curricular decisions need to make more explicit the connection between basic undergraduate purpose and the application of this theoretical foundation to the work world. Commuting students, many of whom work in full-time jobs, are especially eager to identify the relevance of certain abstractions for their work. Curricular design and explicit rationale for that design can highlight that relevance.

Curricular adaptations can be made in many different areas of the academic program. For example, in order to achieve the fundamental goals of undergraduate education, all students need to acquire certain skills, among them research capability. Research in education has found that often adult commuters use the library less frequently than residential students (Copland-Wood, 1986). Library requirements, therefore, may need to be redesigned to that they can be completed in forms appropriate to the commuting learners. Moreover, Wagner and Kappner

(1987) argue that entire library instructional programs need to be designed for the commuting students who require instruction defined in terms of access to information as well as basic library use and research strategy. The result, they contend, will allow these students, typically library under-users, to become more independent and academically capable.

Appropriate modifications of other curricular approaches are also needed. Commuter campus classes would, for example, require few, if any, assignments which mandate that students meet in specific groups outside of class. If group assignments are desirable, then options should be provided for commuters whose schedules preclude such meetings. Moreover, if groups are absolutely essential for all class members, then class time should be set aside for these consultations. These are clearly modifications made with the commuter student needs in mind.

In classes, innovative teaching strategies can engage the interest of the commuter student. Mason and Chew (1983) discovered that nontraditional students responded favorably to instructional methods based on feminist strategies for teaching, methods such as interdisciplinary orientation, peer teaching, and wide diversity of materials. In one program designed specifically to meet the needs of adult commuter students, the dean noted that "In traditional classrooms, students go from theory to experience. We're going in the opposite direction" (Collison, 1988, p. A40). Bok (1986) argued that a well-developed effort to assist different students would go beyond helping the students to adjust: it would also "serve as a valuable resource for informing the faculty of pervasive student problems that call for changes in the academic program itself" (p. 175).

The different nature of the commuter campus has implications for faculty members also. Peterson (1981) warned against faculty members having an excessive

"youth orientation" (321). With increasing numbers of mature learners, faculty members may need to shift their orientations away from that of omniscient authorities. Faculty members will be most effective when they adapt content of their courses and methods of instruction to the characteristics of the student enrolled (Gaff and Gaff, 1981, pp. 651-652). This kind of adaptation does not mean lowering standards or abandoning the intellectual ideals of undergraduate education. Rather, it provides instruction in a manner that maximizes the likelihood that students will understand and remember fundamental ideas.

This move away from the role of faculty member as the sole expert may excite and frighten faculty who are accustomed to non-questioning and dependent students. L. Knefelkamp, academic dean at Macalester College who has conducted much research about adult learners said, "Adult students are different from younger students. They don't salute. They demand a different relationship. It changes the power in the classroom." (Collision, 1988, p. A40) The advantages of this shift in power, however, are not just for the commuter students. Reframing the classroom as a place where all can learn can invigorate faculty. Increased flexibility and adaptation are the keys to faculty success with this different student body.

Last, co-curricular activities associated with speech communication are affected by the nature of the campus. The activities most typically sponsored by speech departments are those in forensics and debate. Student participation in activities that require during-the-week practices and weekend travelling is profoundly affected on a campus where students have fulltime jobs and families. Copland-Wood (1986) found that adult commuter students at a state university's home campus were much less involved in campus organizations than were the residential students. Forensics directors at many commuter campuses become

frustrated at the inconsistent commitments and time involvements of the commuter forensics participants.

What, then, can be done to build and maintain viable co-curricular programs on such campuses? First, recruitment success can be enhanced when the practical advantages of forensics are explicitly and persuasively presented. Students who are working in jobs need to understand that forensics experience has practical value. For the retail sales person, forensics may improve skills in meeting people. Publicity about the forensics program can highlight the practical values of participation. Second, frustration will be lessened greatly if expectations are sensible. It is simply unrealistic to expect a divorced mother of three or a full-time single factory worker to devote the time to forensics that a single, 18-year-old living in a residence hall can devote. It is important also to plan time flexibility in practice schedules and to moderate the level of travel required. Harrington wrote that faculty and advisors of extracurricular programs simply must accept part-time enrollment with all its consequences in situations where commuter students predominate (1977, p. 47).

Summary

As increasing numbers of American postsecondary learners enroll in commuter campuses, departments of speech communication can identify the characteristics which make those commuting students somewhat different from their counterparts on residential campuses. Adaptations in curriculum, faculty orientation, and co-curricular activities can be made so that the university experience is as productive for the commuters as for the residential students. Adaptations, if made thoughtfully, can also provide an impetus for development and strengthening of the curriculum.

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